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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: PRESIDENT ADVISOR YERTYSBAYEV
SUPPORTS EARLY ELECTIONS, DIALOGUE WITH OPPOSITION

Classified By: Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland, 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In the course of a very frank conversation on February 26, Presidential Advisor Yermukhamet Yertysbayev told the Ambassador that he supports early parliamentary elections and establishing a dialogue between the government and opposition. He explained he favors a two-party system for Kazakhstan, with one pro-Nazarbayev party and a second opposed to the government. Yertysbayev described ousted BTA bank chairman Mukhtar Ablyazov as a "threat to the system" because of his vast financial resources and willingness to use them to fund the opposition. He argued that it is critical President Nazarbayev serve out his full term, through the end of 2012, because only Nazarbayev can keep a lid on the country's problems. Yertysbayev was uncertain whether Nazarbayev will run again in 2012, but expressed doubts that two frequently named contenders -- Senate Chairman Tokayev and Astana Akim (Mayor) Tasmagambetov -- have the leadership qualities necessary to succeed him. Yertysbayev said he personally favors further political liberalization, but admitted that the economy is Nazarbayev's top priority, with political reform in "tenth place." He acknowledged that international opinion and pressure, expressed both publicly and in private, has an influence on the Kazakhstani government. He agreed Kazakhstan might be able to play a role in improving U.S.-Russian relations.
END SUMMARY.

SUPPORTS EARLY ELECTIONS, DIALOGUE WITH OPPOSITION

¶2. (C) During a February 26 meeting with the Ambassador, Presidential Advisor Yermukhamet Yertysbayev said he remains a supporter of early parliamentary elections. He explained that he has not only called for early elections in his public comments to the media, but has also expressed the same opinion to President Nazarbayev in private. According to Yertysbayev, it is critical to establish a dialogue between the government and opposition -- and the dialogue needs to take place in a multi-party parliament, "not outside on the public squares." Yertysbayev pointed to Ukraine as a model. "We can criticize the Ukrainians for many things, but they have managed to create a dialogue within their parliament among opposing political forces," he said. "If something were to happen today to President Nazarbayev such that he

became incapable of running the country -- for example, if he were to fall seriously ill -- Kazakhstan would face a complete crisis, because there is no mechanism for opposing forces to come together and reach compromise," he maintained.

13. (C) In Yertysbayev's opinion, the ideal time for early elections would be as soon as possible -- in March or April -- because the opposition is still weak and divided, which should ensure that the ruling Nur Otan party wins. If elections were held later in the year, Nur Otan might actually lose, he claimed. The opposition has united in the past and could do so again. "The most dangerous situation for the government would be if they all came together behind one leader, it doesn't even matter which one," he said.

FAVORS TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

14. (C) The Ambassador asked whether the government would even permit a strong opposition to emerge. Yertysbayev responded that the government would, in fact, restrict the opposition's activities as much as possible, including limiting the opposition's access to the broadcast media, denying opposition requests to hold rallies, and bribing opposition leaders to divide them. He explained, "I don't approve of this approach. I am for a two-party system -- one party would be pro-Nazarbayev, and other party would be opposed to the government. The parties would be something like the Democrats and Republicans. While this model would be somewhat artificial in Kazakhstan, it would be beneficial and allow for effective control to be exerted over the government." "Unfortunately," he continued, "the government

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views the opposition as enemies, not as opponents," and does not want to provide a level playing field for political competition. "Just imagine if Obama hadn't had access to the media, only McCain," he added.

DESCRIBES ALGA, ABLYAZOV AS A "THREAT TO THE SYSTEM"

15. (C) The Ambassador asked Yertysbayev which political parties he considers to be relevant. Yertysbayev responded that there are only three serious parties -- Nur Otan, Azat, and the unregistered Alga party, "the others just exist on paper." (NOTE: With this response, he was essentially dismissing the relevance of the National Social Democratic Party of Zharmakhan Tuyakbay -- who was the united opposition candidate in the 2005 presidential elections -- and Serikbolsyn Abdildin's Communist Party. END NOTE.) The Ambassador asked why the government won't register Alga. Yertysbayev explained that this is because ousted BTA Bank Chairman Mukhtar Ablyazov is behind the party. According to Yertysbayev, "Ablyazov promised Nazarbayev to stay out of politics, but he has been financing Alga and the opposition newspaper 'Respublika' and will continue to do so, even if he doesn't return to Kazakhstan. Ablyazov took \$9.5 billion from BTA and represents a danger to the whole system. Alga has 40,000 to 50,000 members, or maybe even 100,000 members, and there is a possibility that Ablyazov will run for office."

SAYS IT'S CRITICAL NAZARBAYEV SERVE OUT HIS TERM

16. (C) Kazakhstan, Yertysbayev continued, has a lot of problems -- including the potential for separatism in the heavily ethnic Russian North and oil-rich West, potential inter-ethnic conflicts, social tensions between rich and poor, and "territorial claims." Only Nazarbayev can keep a lid on these problems, which is why it's critical that he remain in power for his full term, through the end of 2012, he argued. "If he were to stumble now, no one knows what would happen in the country," Yertysbayev maintained, "but we'll see what happens in 2012, whether he'll run again or anoint a successor." The Ambassador asked which of those two options Nazarbayev would more likely choose in 2012. Yertysbayev responded, "If there were a strong personality

from the younger generation, he would step aside, but for now, there isn't. It's very difficult to make a prognosis three years out. Look, we're confronting a financial crisis that no one predicted the year before it began."

EXPRESSES DOUBTS ABOUT TOKAYEV, TASMAGAMBETOV

¶7. (C) The Ambassador then asked whom Yertysbayev considers the most likely contenders to succeed Nazarbayev. "I could mention several names," Yertysbayev responded, "but this would just be my subjective opinion." He explained that usually two individuals are named as possibilities -- Senate Chairman Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev and Astana Akim (Mayor) Imangali Tasmagambetov. However, according to Yertybayev, "Tokayev does not have the charisma or character that Nazarbayev has, which is necessary to lead the country." In the case of Tasmagambetov, "people view him quite negatively because of his alleged corruption and the houses (illegally constructed by poor migrants) that he bulldozed while Almaty Akim. He also doesn't have the right character for a leader. We shouldn't forget that a successor is going to have to run in an election and win against an opposition candidate," Yertysbayev argued. The Ambassador asked about the prospects for Nazarbayev's son-in-law Timur Kulibayev to emerge as the successor. "Anyone can run, but the question is, can that person win?" he reiterated, "If there is a fair election like in the United States, an unexpected person might even emerge, though if the election is tightly controlled by the government, the Nur Otan candidate will have a big advantage. That's what makes the outcome difficult to predict."

TALKS BLUNTLY ABOUT NAZARBAYEV

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¶8. (C) Yertysbayev characterized the recent amendments to Kazakhstan's election, political party, and media legislation as "insignificant," and said he is a proponent of further liberalization of these laws. However, he explained, "I don't make policy. I'm just a humble advisor with a small office in the Presidential Administration. Sometimes Presidential Nazarbayev listens to my recommendations, but political reform is in tenth place on his list of priorities; the first priority for him is the economy -- the financial crisis, unemployment, the banking sector's problems, etc."

¶9. (C) Yerysbayev said bluntly about Nazarbayev, "He was 13 years old when Stalin died, and he cried when it happened. He was already 51 years old when the Soviet Union collapsed. So he's a product of the Soviet system. That's why he's likes to maintain such tight control." However, Yertysbayev was quick to add, "But the political culture of the country is very low, and the tight control has been justified. There's been no ethnic conflict, we've had strong economic growth, and we have good relations with the United States, Russia, and China. The plusses (of Nazarbayev) far outweigh the minuses." He also said Nazarbayev had recently told him that despite the financial crisis, the United States will remain the world's strongest power for the next 50 years, and thus it is important for all the Central Asian countries to continue developing close relations with the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGES INTERNATIONAL OPINION MAKES A DIFFERENCE

¶10. (C) The Ambassador asked whether international opinion really does have an influence on the Kazakhstani government, and if so, what is more effective, private criticism or public criticism. Yertysbayev responded that international opinion is, in fact, taken into account by the government -- and played a role in the recent Constitutional Council ruling that declared the proposed religion law to be unconstitutional. He explained that both private and public pressure works, and the most effective appeals are those made directly to Nazarbayev because he's in charge of both domestic and foreign policy. After Nazarbayev, the place to direct pressure is toward the Parliament and Cabinet. "The

West has influenced us in a good way on a number of occasions. We're a young country and sometimes we don't understand our international commitments, and how to behave in international organizations like the United Nations and OSCE. We have to be told where we fall short." Yertysbayev praised USAID, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and other U.S. organizations for their roles in promoting democracy and human rights in Kazakhstan.

EXPRESSES DOUBTS ABOUT RUSSIAN INTENTIONS

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Kazakhstan might be able to play a role in fostering better relations between the United States and Russia. Yertysbayev agreed that Kazakhstan should be able to assist, since it has good relations with both countries. If Kazakhstan undertook such an initiative, Russia would appreciate it and respond positively, he contended. Yertysbayev nevertheless cautioned, "I believe that President Obama and Secretary Clinton want better relations with Russia, but I don't know what the Russians want. As (Russian opposition leader Gary) Kasparov has said, 'Putin wants to rule like Stalin, but live like (Russian billionaire Roman) Abramovich' -- which is a bad for democracy and human rights in Russia."

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Yertysbayev certainly lived up to his reputation. The Ambassador has had a number of frank conversations with other senior government officials, but none as free-wheeling as this one with Yertysbayev. It impresses us that President Nazarbayev has such a liberal-thinking iconoclast as a top advisor, and indicates that Nazarbayev does not want to live in an echo chamber surrounded solely by sycophants, but instead remains open to

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hearing views that likely diverge from his own. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND